



Committee on Public Works & Utilities and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell
Councilor William H. Dwight
Councilor David A. Murphy
(Vacant)

MEETING MINUTES

Date: June 27, 2016 **Time:** 4:15 pm
Location: City Council Chambers
212 Main St., Northampton, Massachusetts

1. Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call:

At 4:17 Councilor Bidwell called the meeting to order. Present were: Councilors Bidwell, Dwight and Murphy. No other City Councilors were present. Also present was Mayor Narkewicz and former City Councilor Paul D. Spector.

Councilor Jesse M. Adams recently resigned from the City Council. Up until his resignation, Councilor Adams was Chair of the Committee on Public Works and Utilities. Councilor Bidwell, Vice-Chair, will be the interim Chair until a full slate of city councilors is achieved. Once this happens, a new Chair will be elected by the committee.

2. Public Comment: None

3. Approve Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Minutes of March 28, 2016: Councilor Dwight moved to approve the minutes; Councilor Murphy seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 3 Yes, 0 No.

4. Items Referred to Committee:

The following items were not reviewed by this committee. Both items have been referred to the Public Works Commission where a public hearing will take place (currently scheduled for June 29, 2016). This committee will take up both items after receiving a recommendation from the Public Works Commission. Councilor Dwight moved to postpone discussion until after a recommendation by the Public Works Commission; Councilor Murphy seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 3 Yes, 0 No.

A. 16.064 Petition to discontinue a portion of Elm Street - Referred to Committee on 5/5/2016

B. 16.110 Petition to accept a portion of Pleasant Street/Route 5 - Referred to Committee on June 2, 2016

Committee on Public Works and Utilities Meeting Minutes
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5. New Business: Discussion Regarding Potential Committee Consolidation:

With the Board of Public Works no longer a committee and the Public Works Commission about to be disbanded, Councilor Bidwell noted that this committee is the last forum for discussions regarding Public Works and Utilities matters. Councilor Bidwell thought that this might be a good time to talk about the role of the committee going forward. There are a fair amount of people in the community with public works experience, technical background and institutional memory; Councilor Bidwell wondered if the committee wanted to explore the possibility of bringing that expertise to this committee, and if so, in what capacity would these members be added (voting, non-voting, etc.). Councilor Bidwell asked what items might be brought forward to this committee.

Councilor Murphy noted that Public Works is the only City department that has a committee dedicated to discussing its concerns, with the exception of the school department. He wondered what the Mayor thought was the committee's role.

Councilor Dwight noted that the City Council is tasked with approving rates (water / sewer) and this rate approval is not something that is done in other departments. The rate subject is something that is referred to this committee.

Councilor Murphy asked what other types of things the Mayor might send to the committee; once this is understood, then a determination could be made about the make-up of the committee.

Councilor Dwight noted that the purpose of the committee is to get "more granular" when discussing important topics. The stormwater conversation is the perfect example. The Councilor's limited knowledge concerning what would be involved in the processes as the Council tries to establish a fee system/schedule suggests that more knowledgeable members (such as what was provided for by the Public Works Commission) might prove of value. Now, this committee would lead public discussions and it would be nice to have the expertise available. The City Council, under its rules, does have the ability to create mixed-member bodies, as long as it is clear that the purpose is to expand the knowledge on an issue that it is responsible for voting on. The committee cannot direct the DPW to do something.

Councilor Bidwell asked the Mayor what types of things he might send to the committee.

Mayor Narkewicz points out that even with the elimination of the Public Works Commission, there are still several committees that are currently in existence that are providing support on various issues. These committees include: the Re-Use Committee; the Public Shade Tree Commission; Energy & Sustainability; and Transportation and Parking Commission. DPW staff members participate on these committees, including the director and administrative staff. The mayor points out that at any time he could gather a group of knowledgeable individuals and ask them for advice on a particular subject. He does not need to revise the Administrative Code in order to do that. Regarding what items might be brought forward to this committee, the Mayor cited the following:

- Street acceptance / discontinuance
- Water/sewer rates
- New policies relating to green infrastructure
- Ordinances pertaining to public works

The Mayor will be bringing forward an ordinance to change the duty of holding street acceptance / discontinuance public hearings from the Public Works Commission to the Planning Board (as already required by state law). This doesn't mean that the Public Works and Utilities Committee of the City Council could not hold their own public hearing.

Councilor Bidwell noted that this committee is not an oversight body. However, it could be seen as a body to help build support on various measures by building awareness and help with informing the public.

Former Councilor Spector noted that he participated on the former Board of Public Works. The committee had a variety of agenda items and would often interact with the public. He noted that this doesn't fit in with the new model under the current Charter. Public Works is a common service used by more members of the public. The make-up of the committee included department members across several City agencies. It was a high-functioning committee. When the Charter changed, "experts" were asked to come to the Public Works Committee of the City Council only as needed. Councilor Spector feels as though something was lost with this transition. Topics that went before the Board of Public Works included Roberts Dam; the Landfill Closing; Street Acceptance procedures; and Stormwater. The public was involved to a larger degree. Under the new Public Works Committee of the City Council, the committee had difficulty determining its role. At times there were specific agenda items that the committee could tackle, but there were also times when the committee cancelled meetings because it did not have agenda items. It was never again the packed meeting as when the Board of Public Works meetings were held.

Mayor Narkewicz commented that while the Board of Public Works talked about a lot of issues, he wondered whether the committee was able to develop effective solutions.

Councilor Spector noted that much of the time was spent helping the Dept. of Public Works deal with the political process, especially pertaining with how to deal with the public. At first it was difficult, but after a while he believes that they were more effective.

Councilor Dwight noted that this committee could play that same role in helping to educate the public on key issues. They are not, however, an oversight body over various departments in the City. There is room to do the political dimension as described by former Councilor Spector. There are a number of issues that can be brought forward to this committee. He sees this committee's role as to make recommendations to the full City Council concerning certain issues, as well as to provide a forum for public input.

Mayor Narkewicz noted that he would be willing to provide resources and expertise, including department personnel for matters as they come up, however, he would not be willing to have employees report on on-going departmental activities.

Councilor Spector noted that when the Board of Public Works was active, it was helpful to have a broad spectrum of people participating on the committee, especially when the public was there. Under the Public Works Committee of the City Council, when issues came up, often times there were delays on resolving issues due to the lack of expertise on the committee. It is hard to predict the issues that would come before the committee.

Councilor Bidwell noted that some of the issues discussed by Councilor Spector would not come before this new committee.

Councilor Dwight noted that there was formerly a Police Committee that often times acted as if it had authority over the Police Department. This was, however, a disservice to the public, because in reality it had no authority to tell the Police Department what to do. Now there is greater transparency with clearer lines of authority. There is temptation to default to the way things used to happen, but this might have not been the most effective or legal way.

Mayor Narkewicz noted that even if the committee wanted past BPW experts to help with issues, they don't have to be made members of the committee. These people can be called forward as needed.

Councilor Bidwell noted that he is not sure that there is a good understanding about the issues coming before this committee to ask for people to sign-up as members. There would be the opportunity to add members on an ad-hoc basis. When necessary, the folks uniquely qualified to address an issue could be called upon.

Former Councilor Spector noted that in a different model, that of the Energy Commission, the Chair might ask the opinion of committee members and there was an exchange of information.

Mayor Narkewicz notes that Energy & Sustainability model is based on the Transportation and Parking model. Those bodies deal with issues that cross different departmental lines. Items are referred to various committees based on the types of issues that need to be addressed..

Councilor Dwight noted that there is a difference is between what the Mayor's Office does, which is policy development, and what the City Council does, which is ordinance development. The Mayor charges his staff to develop policy. The City Council committees are not crafting policy, but this is different because this is not the way it was done in the past. In the past many committees made policy. This is not the intent and this has taken some getting used to. The authority differences are becoming brighter and clearer. A better forum can be developed for give-and-take between the public and committee members.

Councilor Spector noted that during the public comment period during Board of Public Works meetings, many issues would be brought up and addressed. The public used this as an opportunity to complain. Occasionally people might come to City Council to speak during public comment about a very specific issue.

Councilor Dwight noted that this complaint avenue has a value. While a single complaint may not result in policy or ordinance change, speaking up about an issue does have value. Beyond providing a forum for complaints, this committee could act as a forum to educate the public about certain issues.

Mayor Narkewicz noted that this may have been a good forum to discuss the capital plans for the stormwater needs. The City hired experts from the "outside" and looked at the needs for 10 – 20 years. They put together a report and a public forum was put together to explain the roadmap of activities required to fulfill the plan. Only one person came to the public forum. When the DPW and the Board of Health had public hearings about the landfill expansion, no one came. This may have been the right committee / forum to bring those types of issues forward in order to get more public participation. The Mayor believes that there will likely be more issues like these in the future; however, he cannot predict what those issues might be.

Councilor Dwight noted that the committee would not hire consultants, but might ask residents to donate their time on a particular topic. With stormwater, there was a citizen committee that crafted a policy. The committee had a fair amount of buy-in and public participation.

Councilor Bidwell noted that there does not appear to be a compelling reason to add members to the committee at this time. As issues come along, perhaps people might be invited to participate, or perhaps a specific study group might be formed to address a particular topic. Situation by situation the committee could consider inviting the Mayor's staff to participate. No permanent change to the committee is required at this time. Councilor Murphy agreed.

6. Adjourn:

Councilor Dwight moved to adjourn the meeting at 5:15 p.m.; Councilor Murphy seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 3 Yes, 0 No.

Prepared By:

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